

Research Project: Sustainable Food Systems - Accounting for Taste.

Researchers: Prof Terry Marsden, Prof Robert Lee, Dr Samartha Thankappan, Dr Andrew Flynn, Prof Kevin Morgan, Dr Everard Smith & Lisa Carson.

Background:

This Project focused on the key themes of accountability across the food supply chain, and scrutinised actions that take place above the level of the nation-state, at state, regional and local levels, as well as by vested private interests (business) and consumer/social groups. It analysed the role of key stakeholders, including governments, consumers, retailers and producers, in shaping this evolution through regulatory case studies and analysis of industry trends.

Aims & objectives:

To develop an understanding on the changing nature of public regulation with the setting up of new agencies like the FSA in the UK and European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in Europe and also the growth and clarification of private systems of regulation particularly with certifications like EUREPGAP and to comprehend what the hybrid nature of regulation is in the agri-food sector and what its implications are for different actors in the supply chain.

- What are the different forms of accountability to consumers and regulators that currently prevail in the food sector? Whom do consumers hold to account for food quality and safety?
- How do retailers manage consumer demands for quality and food safety?
- By going beyond baseline standards, corporate retailers perform a public interest role, but how should regulators respond if standards fall?
- Within the context of different types of supply chain management, how does the evolving context of food regulation within the EU affect the sourcing strategies of corporate retailers?
- How do corporate retailers assure quality within their overseas supply chains?
- To what extent are the risks associated with food safety internalised amongst food suppliers and retailers, externalised or shared with regulators?
- What is the relationship between risk, different supply chain relationships and accountability to consumers and regulators?

About the research:

The project was carried out in four inter-related phases, and utilised a range of data gathering and analytical techniques. In the first phase the changing dynamics of food regulation and accountability across the agro-food chain in the EU was mapped, and in the second phase the above exercise was replicated at the UK. In the third phase regulatory case studies were conducted across two supply chains (fresh fruit and vegetables and red meat). The final phase aimed to assess how our early work on the regional (EU) and domestic (UK) regulation of food supply and food safety is influenced at the global level. To this end, global organisations like the FAO, WHO, IAEA and WTO were interviewed. The project was developed and extended through collaborations with research partners in Michigan State University, USA; Wageningen University; Netherlands, University of Helsinki, Finland and Auckland University, New Zealand.

Results and outputs:

The results of the project revealed:

- A significant trend towards Europeanisation of food policy in the UK;
- A growing institutionalisation of these policies and related empowerment of a different set of interest groups when specific issues e.g. GM, BSE and other food safety issues are concerned;
- Private interest groups are increasingly playing a pivotal role in reshaping the UK food policy;

- Retailers are developing their own “codes of practice” including Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) and specifications related to intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. These private specifications are based on national and EU food safety and quality regulations and in most cases exceed these regulations. However, exercising extensive private standards is a way to prove they have exercised ‘due diligence’ based predominantly on third party certification;
- Global organisations believe that the work being carried out by the private sector is laudable and the ability of the private sector to bring about a market evolution is encouraging, as this demonstrates that private incentives can sometimes overcome technical barriers to trade. Member nations bestow global organisations a fairly open hand in developing new ideas, but are very wary of conferring any authority in, over their trade or over their internal regulation;
- Marsden, T., Lee, R., Flynn, A. and Thankappan, S. (2010), [*The New Regulation and Governance of Food: Beyond the Food Crisis?*](#), Routledge Studies in Human Geography, Vol. 29, Routledge.
- Morgan, K. (2010), [*Local and green, global and fair: The ethical foodscape and the politics of care*](#), *Environment and Planning A*, 42 (8), 1852-1867.
- Lee, R. and Marsden, T. (2009), [*The globalization and re-localization of material flows: Four phases of food regulation*](#), *Journal of Law and Society*, 36 (1), 129-144.
- Thankappan, S. (2008), [*European food regulation and accountability: The interplay of influences shaping the new regulatory terrain*](#), in Gunning, J. and Holm, S. (eds.) *Ethics Law and Society Volume IV*, Ashgate Publishing.
- Morgan, K., Marsden, T. and Murdoch, J. (2006), [*Worlds of Food: Place, Power and Provenance in the Food Chain*](#). Oxford Geographical and Environmental Studies, Oxford University Press.
- Carson, L. and Lee, R. (2005), [*Consumer sovereignty and the regulatory history of the European market for genetically modified foods*](#), *Environmental Law Review*, 7 (3), 173-189.
- Smith, E., Marsden, T., Flynn, A. & Percival, A. (2004), [*Regulating food risks: Rebuilding confidence in Europe's food?*](#), *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 22 (4), 543-567.
- Flynn, A., Marsden, T. and Smith, E. (2003), [*Food regulation and retailing in a new institutional context*](#), *The Political Quarterly*, 74 (1), 38-46.

Impacts achieved/potential for impact:

The work in this project provides insights for policy makers and practitioners in relation to power balances and processes of accountability in terms of food standards and safety at both a European and UK level. This project led directly to BRASS co-organising (with Agra Europe) the first commercial conference specifically dedicated to CSR and Food in London. Several elements of this stream of BRASS work were presented at this conference alongside key industry speakers and an audience including representatives of many of the UK and Europe’s leading food firms. Results were also presented at a number of industry and policy oriented events including a Food Industry and Risk academic/practitioner workshop (co-organised with the Centre for the Analysis of Risk and Regulation), and the European Union Risk Analysis Information Network (EU-RAIN) Conference.

On the basis of this work, Prof Bob Lee is now working with a consortium of European Banks (led in the UK by Co-op Bank) to develop a position paper on ethical investment in GM food and feed, which is likely to have future impact. The Marsden et al. book encapsulating much of the BRASS food research has recently been published in paperback and with its own US edition. More recently the ‘horsemeat’ scandal meant that BRASS Researchers including Profs Lee and Moran were involved in media comment including the BBC News.